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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUBLIN 000248

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [EI](#)

SUBJECT: BRIAN COWEN POISED TO BECOME PRIME MINISTER OF IRELAND

REF: DUBLIN 192 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: Ambassador Thomas C. Foley; Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

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Bertie Ahern Resigns as Irish Prime Minister  
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¶1. (U) At about 6:00 PM on May 6, former Irish Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Bertie Ahern presented his resignation to Irish President Mary McAleese, clearing the way for Brian Cowen to be elected as the new Prime Minister of Ireland by the Dail (Lower House of Parliament) (reftel). Cowen's election -- a foregone conclusion -- will take place about 3:00 PM on May 8. He is expected to announce his new Cabinet the same evening.

¶2. (SBU) In a political development that was not unexpected, Minister of Arts, Sports and Tourism Seamus Brennan also announced his resignation on May 6. (Comment: Brennan's resignation gives Cowen the opportunity to fill two cabinet positions without changing the current slate of Ministers -- Brennan's and the important portfolio of Minister of Finance, which Cowen is vacating. In addition to the Finance Minister position, the Irish political world is anxious to learn who Cowen will name as Deputy Prime Minister (Tanaiste). However, Cowen has been holding his cards close to his chest; even long-time political pundits don't expect to discover the new Cabinet line-up until Cowen makes a public announcement. End comment.)

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Biography of Brian Cowen, Prime Minister of Ireland  
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¶3. (U) Brian Cowen became Prime Minister (Taoiseach, TEE-SHUCK) of Ireland on May 7, 2008, succeeding Bertie Ahern, who had led the nation for almost eleven years. Prior to becoming Prime Minister, Cowen served in Ahern's cabinet as Deputy Prime Minister (Tanaiste) and Minister for Finance from June 14, 2007 to May 7, 2008, following his poll-topping performance in the May 2007 elections. (He was the highest vote winner with almost 20% first preference votes.) He was appointed Minister for Finance by Ahern in September 2004. Cowen also served as Minister for Foreign Affairs under Ahern from January 2000 to September 2004, a position in which he was regarded as being highly successful.

¶4. (U) Cowen was first elected to Parliament in June 1984 in the Laois Offaly constituency of the Irish mid-lands, in a by-election occasioned by the death of his father, Bernard. As a teenager, he developed a reputation for raising the crowds at his father's election rallies. Having trained and practiced as a solicitor, he brought the raucous, combative style of arguing he developed in university debating circles to Parliament. Throughout his political career, Cowen has

maintained a reputation as a formidable debater and is known for his direct approach to negotiations.

¶15. (U) Prime Minister Albert Reynolds promoted Cowen to the Cabinet in 1992. Introducing Reynolds to the party faithful at the 1992 Convention, Cowen questioned the wisdom of participating in a coalition with the Progressive Democrats stating, "When in doubt, leave them out."

¶16. (U) In 1993, Cowen was promoted Minister for Transport, Energy and Communications in the Fianna Fail-Labour Coalition. After his party fell out of government later that year, he became opposition spokesman for agriculture and later took the health brief. When Fianna Fail returned to government in 1997, he became Minister for Health and, like many of his predecessors, grappled with the problem of improving inadequate health services.

¶17. (U) As Minister for Foreign Affairs, he faced the difficult challenge of implementing the Good Friday Agreement. In addition, Cowen played a central role in the approval of the second Nice Treaty referendum in 2002. He was a key factor in Ireland's successful tenure on the UN Security Council in 2001-2002. He also skillfully defended the Irish Government policy of granting U.S. military and civilian aircraft landing rights at Shannon airport during and after the Iraq conflict.

¶18. (U) In June 2003 during a trip to the Middle East, Cowen met with Arafat in his compound, effectively foregoing a meeting with Prime Minister Sharon and the Israeli government. Afterward, Cowen commented negatively on Arafat's living conditions and urged an end to violence in the region.

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¶19. (U) Cowen utilized his negotiation skills during Ireland's Presidency of the European Union during the first half of 2004, which saw not only the Union's enlargement from 15 to 25 Member States, but also agreements on a new Commission President and the text of a Constitutional Treaty.

¶110. (U) Cowen is noted as a strong supporter of local initiatives. He recently laid the stone for a new 17 million euro (USD 26.5 million) engineering school at the Regional Technical School Athlone, which serves Offaly. He is also a strong advocate of the Atlantic Corridor, a business promotion organization created in 1999 to foster development of the Irish mid-lands through global and cross-border links.

¶111. (U) Cowen is very popular among rank-and-file Fianna Fail members, who affectionately refer to him (as he also refers to himself) as &BIFFO,8 which commonly stands for &Big, Ignorant F--ker from Offaly,8 Cowen,s home county. The description is thought to apply especially well to Cowen, who is burly and brusque, and has the reputation of not being much concerned with his public image.

¶112. (C) Well respected by all parties in Northern Ireland, Cowen is trusted by the Republican community. He enjoys a close working relationship with Peter Robinson, who has taken over leadership of the Democratic Unionist Party in the North and is poised to become First Minister of Northern Ireland in June 2008. (They were fellow Ministers of Finance in their respective states from June 2007 to May 2008.) Cowen is steeped in Fianna Fail tradition and is a popular figure within Fianna Fail.

¶113. (C) Cowen likes to socialize with his constituents in local pubs in his native Offaly and is regarded as having a good sense of humor. However, he does not suffer fools gladly. He is known as having a good singing voice. In May 2003, he took part in a community project in Tullamore (the county seat of Offaly), in which he sang Phil Coulter,s song, &The Town I Love so Well,8 on a compact disk that was

sold to raise funds for charity.

¶14. (C) Cowen is more affable and approachable than former Prime Minister Ahern. Based on assessments of Embassy personnel, Cowen probably offers the opportunity for a closer personal relationship that did Ahern, who was known as a sociable loner.<sup>8</sup>

¶15. (U) A member of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), Cowen serves as President of Clara GAA and played with the Offaly Gaelic Football team in the early 1980,s. He is reportedly interested in horse-racing.

¶16. (U) Cowen is married to Mary Molloy (also from Offaly) and has two daughters, Sinead and Maedhbh.

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End Biography of Brian Cowen, Prime Minister of Ireland  
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FOLEY